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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 002841

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [MOPS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: MURR: HIZBALLAH AND AOUN ARE PLOTTING SINIORA'S
DOWNFALL

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (S/NF) During an August 31 meeting with Ambassador Feltman and poloff, Lebanese Defense Minister Elias Murr said that Hizballah, Michel Aoun, and their allies are planning to launch a potentially violent civil disobedience campaign in November aimed at toppling the Siniora government and putting in a more pliant regime in anticipation of next year's presidential election. Murr said he would immediately coordinate with Saad Hariri, Walid Jumblatt, and Marwan Hamadeh on how to respond to this threat. He stressed that the international community could play a helpful role by supporting the GOL and pressing Israel to lift the air and sea blockade on Lebanon soon. An international representative (Murr suggests British Ambassador James Watt) could also warn presidential-hopeful Michel Aoun that he can expect a full-scale diplomatic embargo on him -- much as with Emile Lahoud -- if he participates in this plot.

12. (S/NF) Murr asked several times whether the blockade will be lifted soon. The Ambassador asked Murr again to give the international community, and especially Israel, a clear understanding of what exactly has been done regarding stopping arms smuggling. Murr agreed that the GOL needs to do more to convince the Israelis of their seriousness, and agreed to provide UNIFIL commander Alain Pelligrini with a helicopter tour of LAF positions along the Lebanon-Syria border and in the Bekaa Valley. At the Ambassador's suggestion, he asked LAF General Shaatly (coordinating with UNIFIL in Naqoura) to share information with UNIFIL and the IDF regarding the LAF deployment along the border with Syria. Murr said that the LAF has so far confiscated 90-100 rockets, as well as a quantity of TNT belonging to Hizballah. He said the TNT is being tested to see if it matched that used in last year's bombings. At the end of the meeting, Murr whispered to the Ambassador to be careful and not travel outside of the Christian suburbs of Beirut. END SUMMARY.

A NOVEMBER SURPRISE

13. (S/NF) Murr started the meeting by saying, "I have information, and you know my information is good." Murr said that he has received word from sources inside Hizballah -- which he subsequently confirmed with sources in Aoun's Free

Patriotic movement (FPM) -- that Aoun and Hizballah have concocted a strategy whereby they and members of the pro-Syrian March 8 movement will try to bring down the Siniora government. For now they plan to continue their verbal sniping at the government -- labeling it crippled and corrupt and calling for a national unity government -- through the end of Ramadan in late October. This will give the Shia supporters of Hizballah a break, after the recent conflict, and a chance to enjoy Ramadan.

¶4. (S/NF) After this, they will send their supporters out into the streets in a campaign of civil disobedience. They hope to provoke the Internal Security Forces (ISF), viewed as a Hariri-controlled outfit, to fire on the protestors, at which point they will "break and burn Solidere" -- the downtown Beirut area rebuilt by Rafiq Hariri (a symbol of both Hariri and Lebanon's post-war rebirth). They will also occupy and stage a sit-in at government offices and Parliament. Their goal is chaos, and they hope their action will coax Lebanese Forces commander Samir Ja'ja to descend from his Bsharre mountain redoubt and to take up weapons against them. Murr says that if Ja'ja joins in the clashes, Hizballah intends to arm Michel Aoun, provoking a rehash of the internecine Christian conflict of the late 1980s.

¶5. (S/NF) The Ambassador asked what the March 8 forces and Aoun hope to achieve through this violence. "They want to paralyze the country," Murr explained, "They want to make the government fall." He said that they would do to March 14 what the pro-independence forces did to former Prime Minister Omar Karami on 2/28/04 (when public protests sparked Karami's resignation). They would then form a new Cabinet with fewer March 14 ministers, a neutral, do-nothing Prime Minister

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(such as bland former Economy Minister Adnan Kassar), a Shi'ite Defense Minister (though not necessarily from Hizballah), and, perhaps most frighteningly of all, Aoun as Minister of Interior. The plotters plan to take control of the army, security services, and reconstruction funds. The coup will reach its crescendo the following November, when the conspirators plan to install a sympathetic new President (probably Aoun) for a six-year, Lahoud-esque term.

COUNTER-STRATEGY

¶6. (S/NF) Murr said he had just sent a trusted officer with a message to Saad Hariri conveying this information. Otherwise, he had not told anyone else of the plot. He intends to hold a council with Hariri, Walid Jumblatt, and Marwan Hamadeh in the coming days to discuss a preemptive strategy to head off the threat (Comment. Murr did not mention that any Maronite would join the council. He did say that Information Minister Ghazi Aridi - a supposed Jumblatt ally - is a "spy" and not to be trusted. END COMMENT).

¶7. (S/NF) According to Murr, the Murr-Jumblatt-Hariri strategy will focus on political, media, and security aspects. On the political front, they will need to quickly build up the strength and presence of the state to face down the challenge to its legitimacy. They will also send a clear message to Ja'ja' not to rise to the Hizballah-Aounist bait -- "Saad will need to tell him that if he decides to play this game, he will go back to prison forever." The position of Nabih Berri will of course be crucial. He will need to be wooed to the government side, though Murr predicted he would try and play a "UN" role, mediating between the two sides, while waiting to see who comes out ahead.

¶8. (S/NF) From the media angle, the GOL will need to launch an organized campaign challenging Aoun and Hizballah's calls for a new National Unity government. (Note: Siniora made remarks to this effect during an al-Jazeera interview at the Stockholm conference on August 31, saying the GOL "enjoys the confidence of Parliament." End Note.) While Murr

anticipates the Hizballah/Aounists will direct their media campaign against Israel and accusing March 14 of collusion, the other side should attack the Syria/Iran axis, as Hariri and Jumblatt have been doing.

¶9. (S/NF) Regarding security, the GOL should ensure there is a sufficient LAF and ISF presence in the greater Beirut area. Murr told the Ambassador that there are currently 18,000 LAF troops on standby in greater Beirut and urban coastal areas. Again, state institutions alone must ensure security. If Ja'ja' comes down the mountain with his militiamen, warned Murr, that will divert the LAF's attention away from securing downtown Beirut against the Hizballah/Aounist assault. Shaking his head when the Ambassador asked whether Ja'ja' had been smuggling arms into Lebanon, Murr said that Ja'ja' has been buying weapons on the local market, and could easily assemble "1,000 gangsters" to engage Hizballah and Aoun. Murr begged again for U.S. support in obtaining needed weaponry and supplies for the LAF and ISF from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE as soon as possible.

THE INTERNATIONAL ROLE

¶10. (S/NF) Aside from arming and supplying the LAF and ISF, Murr said that the international community needs to prop up the Siniora government more generally. The LAF/UNIFIL deployments and IDF withdrawal need to be completed as quickly as possible. In addition, Lebanon needs the air and sea blockade lifted in order to breathe a little easier and revive the moribund economy. The widescale international support for Lebanon's reconstruction should also continue apace. Lastly, Murr suggested that someone from the international community -- he suggested British Ambassador James Watt -- communicate to Michel Aoun that if he takes part in this plot, he can expect a complete international diplomatic embargo on him, much like what Emile Lahoud has suffered.

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¶11. (S/NF) The Ambassador asked whether Murr could wholly trust the LAF to support the GOL when the critical moment comes (Comment. The coup would presumably have the support of at least two former army chiefs, Aoun and Lahoud. End Comment). Murr said that current army chief Michel Sleiman "will follow my orders, or I will put him out of his post." The Ambassador asked if the LAF chief answers only to the President, to which Murr responded that the 1989 Ta'if Accords gives the Council of Ministers control over the army.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE IN LAF MEASURES

¶12. (S/NF) The Ambassador noted that, in order to get the Israelis to lift the air and sea blockade, the GOL needs to convince them that it has carried out effective and credible measures to secure all points of entry. Murr said that the GOL had made a formal request to the German chief of staff for maritime and border support, but that this would need the approval of the German Cabinet and Bundestag, which may take some time. Murr believes the Israelis would accept this arrangement, realizing that sophisticated technology (used correctly), is more efficient than large numbers of troops. Murr asked though that the Israelis not call publicly for the German support, as this would scuttle Lebanese Cabinet approval.

¶13. (S/NF) The Ambassador noted that part of the trick is to figure out how to help the international community, and Israel, better understand what is actually happening on the ground. He suggested it would be useful if the Lebanese were to offer to take a small group of UNIFIL officers on a tour of LAF positions along the border with Syria and in the

eastern Biqa' Valley, to show off what the LAF has done so far. "I will invite (UNIFIL Commander) Pelligrini on a helicopter tour of the area," Murr vowed. The Ambassador also recommended the LAF pass information to the IDF through the UNIFIL coordination sessions which are currently ongoing at UNIFIL headquarters in Naqoura. Hearing this, Murr immediately picked up his cell phone and called General Shaatly, the LAF liaison with UNIFIL (and also reportedly an AMCIT), and asked him to provide maps and information on the Biqa' deployment to UNIFIL -- while the IDF liaison is in the same room -- at the next coordination session on Monday, September 4.

ROCKETS CONFISCATED

¶14. (S/NF) Murr said that the LAF had confiscated another truck full of Hizballah rockets (he did not say whether these were coming from Syria or being transported internally), bringing the total number of rockets taken by the LAF to "90 to 100". The Ambassador asked about reports that an internal shipment of TNT was confiscated, which Murr confirmed. He said the TNT had belonged to Hizballah and is now being tested to see if it is the same as was used in a spate of terror bombings in Christian areas last year. The Ambassador asked if this information could be shared with UNIIIC Commissioner Serge Brammertz, which Murr said might be possible once the GOL had completed its tests. Murr confided that he had planted a story about the TNT confiscation in al-Hayat newspaper. Murr said that Hizballah, unhappy with the robust LAF measures against the group, sent a message directly to Murr's assistant Colonel Bayseri threatening that "a time will come for an accounting". (Note. After the meeting, Murr pulled the Ambassador aside and whispered that the movement of TNT within the country worries him greatly, and he asked that the Ambassador not travel outside of the Christian suburbs in which the Embassy is located. The Ambassador asked Murr if he had any specific threat information against the Embassy or Ambassador, and Murr shook his head, commenting that it was "just a feeling." End Note.)

ASBAT AL-ANSAR

¶15. (S/NF) The Ambassador asked Murr about the threat from sunni militant group Asbat al-Ansar. Murr replied that the group is very dangerous and "fully-handled" by Syria.

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Calling the group the "new Al-Qaeda", Murr said that Asad is handling the Sunni militants in order to create a "new Iraq" in Lebanon.

POTENTIAL FOR MOVEMENT ON 1949 ARMISTICE AGREEMENT

¶16. (S/NF) The Ambassador noted that the Lebanese always refer hopefully to the 1949 Israel-Lebanese Armistic Agreement, while the Israelis consider the agreement null and void (in the aftermath of the 1968 Cairo Agreement) had see little appeal in tryign to revive it. He asked Murr for his opinion on arranging political level discussions on the subject, to see what might be done. Murr suggested that once the deployment/withdrawal phase is over, and after the November threat is thwarted, the GOL will make some suggested revisions to the Armistice Agreement, which the U.S. can share discreetly with the Israelis. When there is some common ground reached, the GOL will publicly declare that it wants to return to the 1949 Agreement, but "we want the following items" -- already agreed to -- "included in the agreement." As the weaker party, Murr said, Lebanon should appear as the instigator of the parley in order to gain approval from Lebanese. Following that, the Lebanese and Israeli Ministers of Defense could set up a meeting on the Blue Line and under the auspices of the UNSYG (whoever that may be) to discuss the amendments to the Agreement.

COMMENT

¶17. (S/NF) Murr sometimes picks up bits of information, combines it with accurate intelligence, considers the point of view of his listener, and weaves a fascinating story where the facts and the fiction nestle comfortably together. But, while we would love to dismiss Aoun's dire predictions out of hand, the public comments of Aoun (especially), Nasrallah, and other pro-Syrian figures provide little comfort: they are entirely consistent with the theory posited by Murr. Moreover, reporting in other channels suggests that Murr's is not simply assembling a melodramatic story in order to frighten us into accelerating our support to the LAF. This is a prediction worth monitoring.

FELTMAN